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Reflections . . .

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Casey Road

by Jerry Horton

Kelly is 13 now and in love with Leonardo de Caprio. On school mornings I walk her to where Mr. Bartz's bus will pick her up. We play silly games while waiting for the bus. (Most 13-year olds would be mortified to be caught playing silly games with their dad, but we are lucky: Kelly has Down syndrome so Dad gets a few more years of grace.) It is late April and the grass is high. Most of the wildflowers are on the wane, although the wine cups are everywhere.

In April, on Casey Road in California, the mustard grass would be waist high to an adult. The farmers planted it between the apricot trees, to be plowed under as green manure. As a four-year-old I ventured across the road with my cousins, the grass perfect for making secret pathways, for playing endless games and returning home, our pants marked with gratifying stains of combat.

It was the California of my childhood. A timeless period, surrounded by aunts and uncles, cousins galore, Grandma and Grandpa Stuckey, and of course Mom, Dad and sister Shirley. We were rural, poor, and—for the most part—happy.

One July I was playing out front. It was 1942 and Dad was soon to be stationed at Los Alamos, New Mexico. One minute I was running through the sprinklers, and the next minute I fell and couldn't get up. Mom and Aunt Agnes took me inside to the living room, but still I couldn't stand. It was what they most feared—polio.

I was quarantined at Santa Clara County Hospital. Mom and Dad could only visit by coming to the outside window—I was in a first-floor room—and waving to me through the glass. They tried to shout encouragement, but that wasn't enough for a scared little boy. The visit ended when the nurse pulled the little crocheted ring and lowered the window blind. For many years I had a recurring nightmare of that window blind going down.

Yet, my boyhood was good. It was only my right leg from the knee down that was affected and after I got a brace I could again ride a bike and play catch. I remember Mom fretting as I returned home at the end of one busy afternoon, dirty and bedraggled, the cast on my right leg muddy and tattered around the toes. She feared further catastrophe, but the damage was done, and I was busy being a little boy.

Still, I hated the innumerable doctors visits, as Mom and Dad sought a cure, a solution. The doctors would make me undress, try to walk, be measured, poked and probed. It was embarrassing and humiliating. Later came the operations at Shriner's Hospital in San Francisco and more separations. I celebrated my thirteenth birthday in the hospital.

That time I was in the hospital for an operation on my left knee, the leg that hadn't been affected by the polio. The surgery was to retard the growth in my unaffected leg, so that I would be less lopsided as an adult. And they did a remarkably good job. The difference between my two legs now is only about 3/4" rather than the several inches it would have been without the operation. (My uncle Paul and brother Herbie were both 6'1" tall and I sometimes joke that I am a 6'1" man trapped in the body of a man 5' 7"!)

High school was hard. I was certain that no girl (later no woman) would ever want anything to do with a skinny-legged gimp like me.

But I was wrong about that, and about a lot of other things, and my life unwound in such manner that I now find myself living in Central Texas, still waiting for the schoolbus at an age most men are retiring and buying RVs to tour the country in.

Still, "April is the cruelest month" as the poet says. And true enough, the sweet cool mornings of this springtime haunt me. I have (I think) achieved acceptance of my own disability, but just when I imagine that I have accepted Kelly's condition, I wish again that I could banish the extra chromosome that handicaps my pride and joy—just as my mother wished to have her "perfect" boy whole again.

I hate more than anything that Kelly has to grow up realizing that she is different, and Kelly hates it, too. "I am not different!" she proclaims defiantly. But she is, and she knows it, just as I knew it. Life delivers hard truths, and we face them as we are able.

But luckily, like her father before her, my daughter claims the privilege of being a little girl, albeit now on the edge of womanhood. She has plans for herself, which may or may not come true. Few of mine did, but others, better, took their place. I never played baseball for James Lick High, but I did win the love of a good woman to share life's journey with. I helped raise four beautiful daughters, and have lived to see my children's children "standing around the table, tall and strong as young olive trees." May it somehow be so for my daughter, and for those who will live at Down Home Ranch with her.

For we do not face those hard truths alone. More and more as I take the walk from home to work and back again on the sandy road—Sandy Road—that runs between our house and the Ranch, I am reminded of my days on Casey Road so many years ago. Friends surround us now, as then, and our days are filled with good work, laughter, music and prayer. Kelly has found enduring friendships also, and looks forward to Special Olympics, Ranch Camp and the unstructured fun of summer visits with family and friends.

When Kelly was born 13 years ago, the pain hit me so hard it finally brought me to my knees, which turns out to be a fine position from which to learn about life. In my first prayer in decades I asked God to "please let her die." I was so ignorant, so vain. Thank God Almighty that my wish-prayer wasn't granted.

"I will turn your tears into laughter" scripture says, and it has happened as promised, and I don't even know whether it was because of my best efforts or despite them.

Whatever I had thought my life was about, it turned out to be about something else. The things which have endured in my memory are so simple—my uncles playing guitar and singing in the living room, family playing cards and laughing, the yellow light from the house streaming through the windows into the yard after dark as we kids played hide and seek among the bushes and pretended not to hear our moms standing at the screen door and calling for us to come in and wash up for bed.

The striving of my youth—the intellectual pretensions, the anxieties, the wrongs committed—which seemed so important at the time, now count as nothing. For Casey Road and Sandy Road have mysteriously connected—California and Texas, 1945 and 1998—and I am home again.

Mission

Down Home Ranch seeks to be faithful to the Christian mission to provide for those in need. Its mission is to build a rural, self-reliant community for adults with disabilities such as mental retardation— offering training, housing, recreation and dignified employment, as well as opportunities for growth in mind, body and spirit.